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## The occurrence of the Grass Owl *Tyto capensis* and Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* in the lowlands of New Guinea

by Neil Stronach

Received 9 April 1990

Two species, the Grass Owl *Tyto capensis* and Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, not normally recorded from the lowlands of New Guinea, are reported here from the upper Ramu River valley of Morobe Province and from the Bensbach River of Western Province, Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1). In New Guinea, both species are known only from the mid-montane grasslands of the Central Highlands, but in their wide distribution elsewhere they are not generally restricted to montane habitats. Until recently, grasslands in New Guinea occupied 2 discrete zones (Henty 1982, Gillison 1983):— extensive anthropogenic grasslands that have existed in the highlands at 1500–2500 m since at least 4000 years BP (Powell 1982); and largely isolated from the highland grasslands, a number of lowland grasslands, some of which are anthropogenic, e.g. those in the valleys of the Markham and Ramu Rivers, while others are at least partly edaphic, e.g. those in the Transfly region of southern New Guinea.

### *Tyto capensis*

On 24 November 1979, two Grass Owls were seen roosting on the ground in dense 1 m-high Kunai Grass *Imperata cylindrica* near sea level on the Bulla Plains near the Bensbach River (9°01'S, 141°11'E). They occupied crude forms in which were found several pellets, which contained the remains of *Sminthopsis rufigenus*, the common dasyurid (marsupial mouse) in the area. The birds were seen in good light at c. 3 m distance and several colour photographs were taken which assisted identification. The Bulla Plains occupy an area of c. 300 km<sup>2</sup> of low relief near sea level and consist largely of seasonally-inundated sedge-rich grassland on poor soils, seasonally inundated grassland on black soils and smaller areas of

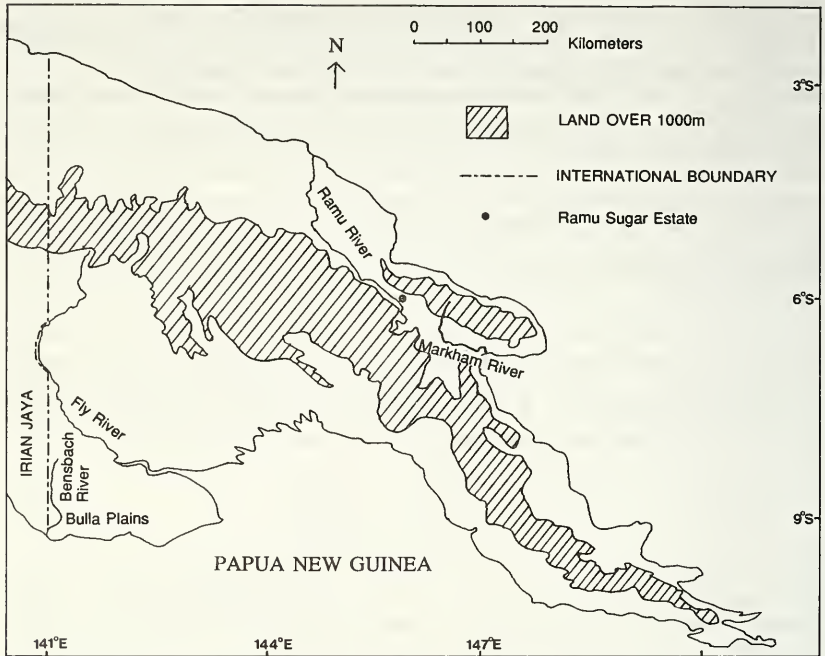


Figure 1. Map of Papua New Guinea showing the locations of the Bulla Plains and the Ramu Sugar Estate. The approximate extent of land over 1000 m is also indicated.

dense *Imperata cylindrica* grassland on slightly higher ground which is less prone to flooding. There are also small relict areas of seasonal *Phragmites karkar* reedswamp, the distribution of which is considerably limited by heavy grazing of introduced *Rusa Deer Cervus timorensis*. Despite considerable travel through all 3 habitats between 1979 and 1982, no further records of grass owls were obtained from the area.

On 27 May 1981 a nest of Grass Owls containing 7 young was found in *Imperata cylindrica/Themeda australis* grassland on Ramu Sugar Estate ( $5^{\circ}58'S$ ,  $145^{\circ}53'E$ , c. 400 m alt) (Fig. 1). The young varied in size from medium downy young to almost fully feathered. Several freshly killed unidentified mice were present in the nest. The grassland appeared to be transitional in character between *Imperata cylindrica* grassland on relatively rich soils and *Themeda australis* grassland on degraded soils (Henty 1982). Both types of grassland are extensive in the Ramu River valley, the latter extending on to the slopes of the surrounding mountains.

Beehler (1978) gives no records for the Grass Owl from either lowland or highland grassland in Morobe Province, and it has been recorded previously in highland grassland only down to an altitude of c. 2500 m (Coates 1985); this contrasts with its habitat in Australia (Calaby 1970), where it occurs mainly in lowland grassland, and in southeast Asia (King *et al.* 1975), where it occurs below 4000 feet. Draffan *et al.* (1983) recorded

Grass Owls from the islands of the Torres Straits in 1978, not far to the south of the Bulla Plains. They presumed that these birds were members of an irrupting population originating in Australia and noted that they did not establish themselves permanently on the islands. Both the date and the location of the Bulla Plains records suggest that those birds may have had a similar origin, but the possibility remains that there is a small permanent populations in the Transfly. The grasslands of the Transfly region include the ranges of a number of Australian grassland species that are not found elsewhere in New Guinea, notably the Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*, Australian Bustard *Ardeotis australis*, Brolga *Grus rubicundus* and Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*. There is also a population of the Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* on the Bulla Plains that may be an isolate of the Australian population. All these species breed successfully and there appears to be no obvious reason why the Grass Owl should not also do so.

The Grass Owls in the Ramu valley appear to be breeding successfully and may represent a resident population that has been overlooked. Alternatively, they may owe their origin to colonization from either Australia or the New Guinea highlands. Grassland connections through formerly forested land between the Ramu and Markham valleys and the grasslands of the highlands are increasing, so colonization of the lowlands by the montane population is not impossible.

### *Anthus novaezeelandiae*

Between 26 and 31 May 1981 several Richard's Pipits were seen on Ramu Sugar Estate. The birds occupied an area of short grassland, maintained as a rough golf course by mowing. Singing Bushlarks *Mirafra javanica* were common in the same habitat. The birds were tame and observations were in good light down to a distance of 4 m, using 8 × 32 binoculars.

Peckover & Filewood (1976) point out that in New Guinea Richard's Pipit is apparently restricted to the mid-montane grasslands of the Central Highlands, at an altitude of 1200–2100 m. Beehler (1978) gives the species altitude range in Morobe Province as 1000–1700 m. This is in contrast to the rest of its wide range, where it is frequently found down to sea level. Beehler *et al.* (1986) mention "unconfirmed reports from Markham valley lowlands" and Coates (1985) states, without details, that it occurs in the New Guinea lowlands. Most of the derived grasslands of the Ramu and Markham valleys are dominated by relatively long grass species, notably *Imperata cylindrica*, *Saccharum* spp. and *Themeda australis* (Henty 1982, Gillison 1983). However, a number of land-use practices, particularly cattle grazing, have produced areas of relatively short grassland that appear to be ideal habitats for Richard's Pipit. Since the highland range of Richard's Pipit is not distant, and grassland is now partly continuous between the mid-montane and lowland habitats in northern Papua New Guinea, it would not be surprising if recent colonization has occurred. Recently, the Grey Shrike Thrush *Colluricincla harmonica* has colonized deforested areas in the Central Highlands and the Pied Chat *Saxicola caprata* has colonized the lowland grasslands around Port Moresby (Peckover & Filewood 1976, Beehler *et al.* 1986).

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Chris Oakes for his hospitality during my visit to Ramu Sugar Estate, and to John West (cartographer), Booker Tate Ltd, for providing exact coordinates of the sugar plantation.

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## The taxonomic status of *Phyllomyias reiseri*

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Received 17 April 1990

The tyrannulet *Phyllomyias reiseri* was described from a single male specimen collected in Piauí, northeastern Brazil (Hellmayr 1905). In 1927, Hellmayr considered *reiseri* to be a subspecies of *Xanthomyias virescens* of eastern Brazil along with *urichi* of northern Venezuela (Hellmayr 1927). Zimmer (1955) resurrected *reiseri* as a distinct species and reported new specimens from Paraguay. More recently, Traylor (1979, 1982) again returned *reiseri* to *virescens* as a subspecies, restricting it to Piauí. Traylor recognized it based only on wing length and, with the limited material available to him, did not feel that plumage characters consistently separated *reiseri* from *virescens*.

I recently discovered 4 additional specimens of *reiseri* in the Museu de Zoologia da Universidade de São Paulo (MZUSP). Two of these specimens were collected in July 1963 at Brasília (15°47'S, 51°11'W) by José Hidasí. The other 2 specimens, from Jaraguá (15°45'S, 49°20'W), Goiás and Sant'Ana do Paranaíba (19°40'S, 51°11'W), Mato Grosso do Sul, were previously reported by Pinto (1944) as *virescens* and accepted as such by Zimmer (1955). I compared these specimens with the 3 *reiseri* (2 from